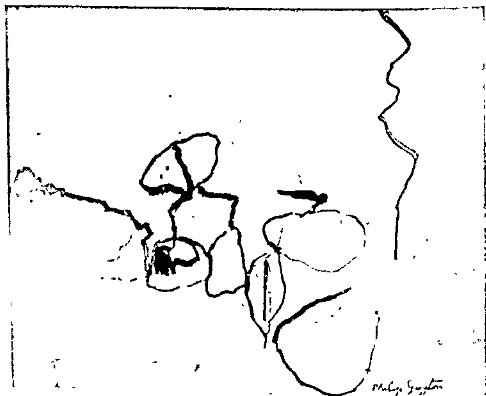


DRAWING 1951 Ink on paper 9¾ x 11½"
Collection Mr and Mrs Adja Yunkers

PHILIP GUSTON

by

DORE ASHTON

Twelve Color Plates

Twenty-two Black and White

Reproductions

GROVE PRESS, INC. · NEW YORK
EVERGREEN BOOKS, LTD. · LONDON

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 59-14404
First Printing

Philip Guston is published in two editions:
An Evergreen Gallery Book
A Cloth bound edition

Distributed in Canada by McClelland & Stewart Ltd.,
25 Hollinger Road, Toronto 16

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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it. There are always two voices
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At work, he carries on an unceas-
his past, his history and paintings
always rumoring, always jostling

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In these artists, the voices are rec-
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The art that is brought forth by "care" is an art in which the creator's "anguished sense of alternatives" has been transformed into a positive force. To engender it, the artist exposes himself to all his past contradictions. The real artist's life, as Rilke said of Rodin's

> ...holds, perhaps, all its past hours, the hours of expectation and abandonment, the hours of doubt and the long hours of need. It is a life that has lost nothing and has forgotten nothing...

This "life" transpires not so much in the externals—the social or anti-social position the artist assumes—as it does in the reveries that terminate in works of art. Guston's reverie, with its dramatic highlights and its "hours of doubt," is always given an optimal atmosphere in which to expand—even in terms of physical environment. Without being aware of it, Guston has always arranged his studios as dim retreats—large, echoing stages in which silver light hangs sepulchrally. His old studio on Tenth Street with its filtered skylight; his stone studio in Woodstock where the damp stones set the restless shadows in his paintings aquiver with their reflection; his former studio on Eighteenth Street, with its three wells of light from three skylights and its long corridors of dimness —all these were hermetic retreats where the irritants of social intercourse, of memory, of reflection were transformed.

The atmosphere Guston establishes for his work is in keeping with the profoundly urban character of his painting. It might be argued that what distinguishes his work, and the work of his generation in the United States, is primarily this urban point of view. Complicated and not easily paraphrased, the urban point of view developed not so much because the pleasures of country and garden were denied the city painter,

but because the nature of existence in a great urban center draws the painter's attention to a different order of experience. The alienation of city life demands a non-naturalistic imagery.

In the absence of "nature" as it used to be understood by painters, the urban artist moves directly to the search for the essence of nature and the unnamable forces that determine it. What he tries to put to the image is not nature itself, but the germ of nature, the abstraction of its vital center. If it is decent to talk about "risks" at all, the risk the contemporary urban artists undertake *lies specifically* in denying the legacy in painting which considered the visual aspects of nature, in favor of a metaphysical search for ideal essences.

From the beginning Guston's work bore the urban stamp. And, in his recent painting, it is emphatic. The dark imagery, the insistence on a smoky register of color, the absolute denial of local color, mark his work as that of an introverted, northern, urban painter. No Mediterranean artist could have pursued abstraction with such unflagging energy.

The metaphysical intent in Guston's painting is natural, for his art is the work of a speculative mind as well as a sensible nature. And the voices the mind attends are not forgotten any more than the sights, smells, and sensations that pass directly to the core. They are voices of similarly speculative minds and similarly tried artists:

The voice of Paul Valéry who considered the Universe as "a gigantic *work*, a gigantic operation of transformation" which had for an end "supreme thought." The ironic, skeptical voice of Chekhov, whose stoic doctor in *Ward Number 6* says that "life is merely an irritating snare" and that the only time in life that one does not feel the snare is "when

people inclined to analysis and generalizations get together and pass the time exchanging lofty, free ideas." The voice of Pasternak, whose books Guston lent me many years ago, who said: "The clearest, most memorable, and important fact about art is its conception, and the world's best creations, those which tell of the most diverse things, in reality describe their own births."

Then, there are the exalted poetic minds given also to speculation, but expressing above all the alienation of the artist--i.e. the work of art--from the world: Kafka in a conversation with G. Janouch:

> For him personally [the poet] his song is only a scream. Art for the artist is only suffering through which he releases himself for further suffering...I hop about bewildered among my fellow men. They regard me with deep suspicion.

And Rilke who saw the artist as a "solitary" whose neighbors

> ...tracked him to his hiding place like a beast to be hunted, and his long youth had no closed season. And when he refused to be worn out and got away they cried out upon that which emanated from him, and called it ugly and cast suspicion upon it.

These minds, concerned with the meaning of human existence, commune in the painter's mind, for he, though his means are different, participates in the same drama. Like the poet, he confronts the great abstractions of the mind and seeks to find corporeal analogues to illuminate them.

I

If Guston's history is followed attentively, one finds it holds a surprising number of constants. He was never, for instance, a realistic painter although his impressionable years coincided with the strongest realist movement this country has ever known. From his youth, Guston attempted to symbolize rather than represent naturalistically significant aspects of human life. He avoided naturalistic genre scenes, studio compositions, unimaginative scenes of workers, farmers, or tenement life.*

While his early work was weighted with references to recognizable objects and incidents, they were used imaginatively. For instance, it was the city that was nearly always the background for his early paintings—almost never a landscape or open vista. But the city was represented as a fantastic compound within which the human drama unfolded. Always it was the figure, the human stance that interested him, and the human condition remains his "subject" today. His development can be simply described as a shifting of focus from the outer to the inner study of man—a course many artists have followed since the late nineteenth century.

In his childhood, Guston lived in Los Angeles and its bizarre character didn't fail to impress him in much the same

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*Yet he was interested in projecting a strong social point of view, a critical thesis, and the "social contact" of certain of his early paintings was emphatic. In his mind, these protestant compositions were in some way related to the large frescoes of the Renaissance.

way it impressed Nathaniel West. The scores of absurd and pathetic cults quartered in Los Angeles (there was one "Blue Triangle" cult right on Guston's own block) were never forgotten. To this day, Guston stands off from anything, including art movements, that verges on the sentimental excesses of California cultism.

Opportunities for contact with "fine art" were infrequent for him in those days in Los Angeles, and after a brief stint at the Otis Art Institute, Guston gave up the idea of art school and had to work for a living. In his free time, he used the Los Angeles Public Library, studying reproductions of paintings by Mantegna, Piero della Francesca, Michelangelo, Signorelli, and Uccello. His interest in the monumental, which was soon to lead him to mural painting, brought him to the past. Copying the old master drawings, he strove to relive the experience of the masters, training his hand, eye, and memory, and, at the same time, setting up the terms for a future dialogue.

He was still in his teens then, and among his encounters with modern art had been a visit to the Arensburg Collection. It was years later, however, that the impact of this extraordinary collection emerged as an influence in his work. Guston remembers that he was chiefly impressed with Picasso's monumental figures of the Twenties, and De Chirico's metaphysical paintings. But he was not ready yet to assimilate this experience.

When he was twenty-two years old, Guston came to New York. He went to work on the mural project (he had already worked on the California project for about a year) of the Work Projects Administration where he joined a community of predominantly young, eager artists. These young men questioned their own premises, and examined the European

avant-garde developments closely. In this environment Guston's own problems began to crystallize. He was instinctively troubled by the estheticism he felt in the geometric painters. But he remembers being impressed by Léger's *The City* and disturbed by it. He was constrained, then, to re-examine his own Renaissance loyalties.

Around 1938, as he recalls, he had had, for the moment, enough of the Renaissance. "I became aware of the total picture space—the total picture plane, that is—as against just using volumes in an empty space." The new, intricate space problems he confronted, however, never wholly absorbed him, and he was careful to conserve the symbolic content of his paintings. Specifically, he says, he wanted to use a "constructed picture space together with symbolic forms." A whole allegorical cast of masked figures and dreamlike musicians continued to appear in his paintings. But it wasn't until 1940, when Guston left the Project and was able to concentrate on easel paintings that he acquired the assurance to launch out freely into symbolism.

His paintings during this period carried the memory of the Renaissance in their systems of accents and intricacy of detail. But the spirit was one of poetic heightening. His affinities with De Chirico were seen in the processions of faceless city windows that often formed the back plane of his compositions; in the long porch posts, like ruined columns, that appeared together with spires and finials; in the brick walls that often pushed the masked figures into a narrow, still space.

His paintings then were closed: worlds deliberately bounded as are the abstract worlds he paints today, closed into themselves in a created atmosphere. The light was sharp,

the modeling sculptural and the feeling for planar classical construction pronounced. But, in 1945, when he painted the important *If This Be Not I* the sharpness ceded to Guston's growing feeling for the sensuous qualities of oil paint.

If This Be Not I was Guston's first full commitment to "painterly" painting, and the first major work in which atmosphere—the ambiguous light that has remained ever since in his work—intervenes and softens the imagery. In this painting Guston is peering inward, already searching for what is behind the visible fact. The figures are no longer imprisoned in keen outlines but are graded off at the edges until they give the illusion of merging, one into the other. The tender melancholy pervading the picture is a note sounded again and again afterwards.

As for color, it was the soft tonal range that Guston has always preferred. The Fauves and Matisse, who used vivid, unmixed color to symbolize visual experiences, did not influence Guston. He moved from modeled form to atmosphere, but remained essentially a tonalist. (Isn't it natural for a man who admired Italian Renaissance painters to be interested in the air that encloses life?)

After *If This Be Not I* there was a moment of hesitation. Guston's dialogue with nature became acute, troublesome. He veered then—as he has often since—in what was superficially an opposite direction, but was, in a deeper sense, merely a shifting of focus. In contrast to *If This Be Not I*, the *Porch #2* is severe, planar, angular, hard-hitting. It is almost as if the painter were rebuking himself for his previous tenderness. It is a concession to an urge that had been gathering in him—an urge to paint a totally imagined space, unrelated to any convention he had used before, and to paint

within that space tortured, abstracted symbols of tragedy whose relationships were not immediately perceived. Crammed into the wafer-thin space, the figures indeed acquire an ominous unreality, and reflect an anguish that seemed to be mounting rapidly in the artist. The play of imprisoned arms and legs, and the disjointed, upside-down figures was agonized. Without consciously willing it, Guston had compressed the figures into a prison. They were impaled on the structural bars and a tremendous, unbearable tension occurs. Contemplating this painting and others like it, Guston realized that the images which had served him for so long no longer seemed necessary, and were in fact unnatural. At that moment, turning back again to his own past, and the past of art, was fruitless. Guston was in crisis.

II

The moments of crisis in an artist's life are not easily routed. They come from deep, inaccessible sources to disrupt him and freeze his will. Guston had, canvas by canvas, painted himself into a crisis: a cycle of beginnings with no fruitions and no prospects.

In such a moment, there is nothing to do but to seek a way to break the cycle, a radical way which, as Paul Valéry indicates in *L'Idée Fixe*, forces the artist to "invent at each instant an original act." Valéry's experience of crisis and his minute examination of its construction in *L'Idée Fixe* covers Guston's experience. Prey to a malaise which destroyed his equilibrium and prevented him from working, Valéry wrote:

> I remembered then that it is good to break the circle of imaginary ills and the rhythm of attack. An anguish of ideal origin, and which many conjunctures have created, must be treated by the recourse to some powerful and simple instinct. That is why, going furiously toward the coast of fallen rocks of all sizes and with the most diverse faces, I imposed upon myself the very difficult work of advancing into the *perfect* disorder of their broken forms and bizarre equilibriums. It was meant to constrain the human machine to produce at each instant a completely new and particular action. In this chaos of rock there was no step, no composition of efforts similar to any other...

Symbolically speaking, Guston too was forced by his malaise to go down to the bizarre rocks and to invent new actions. The harmonies and balances inherited from former

painting no longer represented his feelings.

Yet, it was difficult to discover *why*. Between 1945 and 1947, when Guston taught at Washington University, his reputation had grown enormously. He had already, while teaching at the State University of Iowa, between 1941 and 1945, known a success shared by few artists of his generation. He had won many coveted prizes and was in general in an enviable position. His dissatisfaction therefore was based on no exterior circumstance.

It was during this period that he painted *The Tormentors*, his first radical "invented step." All that is left of his figures are symbolic verticals. And all that is left of their props are vague crutch shapes and a circle which is perhaps a vestige of the bell of the French horn that had appeared in earlier paintings. There is scarcely any space at all: just a close, flat, obscure surface with a patterning of lines, like welded sheets. His sensuous instincts are totally suppressed. There are no subtleties of brushwork. It is hoarse, severe, hard-surfaced. But—it is an abstraction, a step similar to no other.

Shortly after this painting, and still feeling deeply disturbed, Guston went to Europe. There, he spent most of his time looking—and in looking, discovered a fundamental shift of interest in himself. For years he had been interested in the great mural art, the frescoes of the Renaissance. But in wandering through the European museums, Guston discovered that it was the *painterly* painters who most excited him: the oil painters who had used their medium with delight; the Venetian painters, Titian particularly, and also Tiepolo, revealed themselves to him. After many months, Guston returned, heartened, to the United States.

The first step taken, before his European trip, became

a matter of adapting his gait to irregularities that awaited him. (He has never since permitted himself to move unaware and at ease, to step with confidence over familiar terrain.) His next few paintings after *The Tormentors* were still hard, with a rigorously willed flatness. But his mind and feelings were moving swiftly. He was working then in New York, and he had joined the community of artists who were rapidly moving far from any established conventions. It was a high-keyed period in New York, and the mounting excitement among the painters was congenial to Guston, and fed his own nervous excitement.

During that time, two impulses occurred simultaneously in him, and have more or less continued together ever since. The first was the impulse to make of the matter of paint itself a binding medium, to transform it into the unified atmosphere in which invented shapes and symbolic forms could act.

The second tended to contradict the first: it was to undress the forms he invented and discover their inner structures; to get rid of the painterly nuances which distracted his hand from the essentials.

It was this impulse to find the simplest common denominator of form that led Guston to make countless ink drawings between 1949 and 1954, drawings which sometimes established a flow of curving shapes, sometimes a vertical progression of roughly rectangular forms. With the curving linear drawings, Guston suggested the curious pockets of space in nature, and the extruding organic shapes which he suspended in a non-naturalistic space. In the sharper drawings, with emphatic vertical strokes, the composition moves energetically into infinity, suggesting movements in nature known to us but not visible. Like his paintings, Guston's

drawings reflect the movement of the pendulum in him that swings from equilibrium to disruption; that touches now form, now chaos; that strikes to synthesize the two irreconcilables.

Since he had moved into the deeps of the imagination, Guston was constrained to determine his vocabulary and he did it largely through these drawings in which, as Wolfflin said of Rembrandt's drawings, "the signs are alienated from the form." Rembrandt alienated his signs in order to "give *the vibration of the picture as a whole, which persists even* where the eye was not intended to perceive the individual form-signs."

It was this vital vibration that Guston pursued in the silvery calligraphic paintings of around 1950 and 1951. The signs, which moved sinuously on the picture plane, were meant to symbolize the solid matter at the heart of what was seen and felt, as well as the *known* movement of that matter. Though the signs were alienated—i.e. abstracted—they touched points of memory and sensation, and conveyed both energy and growing power. They throbbed with the intimation of hidden life.

The work that evolved in this period bore the marks of Guston's earlier distress in their single-minded extremism. Guston, along with his New York contemporaries exploring new areas, knew that there were multiple realities to be pursued. But he tended to separate them at first. In his drawings and first pale calligraphic paintings, he exhausted the linear mode. Later, when he turned to textural painting, he pursued it exclusively; and he followed texture and atmosphere until they were virtually absorbed by the maturing need to synthesize all these intimately known elements.



PAINTING 1952 Oil on canvas 48 x 51"
Collection Mrs Albert H Newman



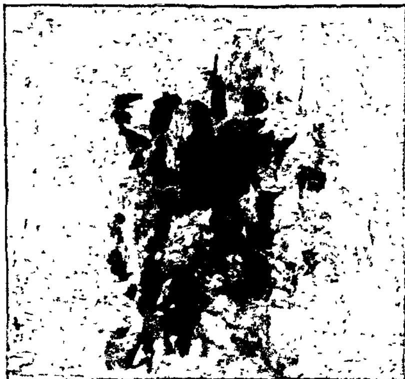
ATTAR 1953 Oil on canvas 48 x 46"
Collection Mr and Mrs Morton Feldman



ZONE 1953-54 Oil on canvas 46 x 48"
Collection Mr and Mrs Ben Heller



BEGGAR'S JOYS 1954-55 Oil on canvas 72 x 68"
Collection Mr and Mrs Boris Leavitt



DIAL 1956 Oil on canvas 72 x 76"
Collection Whitney Museum of American Art, New York



VOYAGE 1956 Oil on canvas 72 x 76"
Collection Albright Art Gallery, Buffalo, N. Y.,
Gift of Seymour H. Knox



PAINTER'S CITY 1956-57 Oil on canvas 65 x 77"
Collection Mr and Mrs I Donald Grossman



THE CLOCK 1957 Oil on canvas 76 x 64"
Museum of Modern Art, New York,
Gift of Mrs Bliss Parkinson



TABLE II 1957 Oil on paper 25 x 36"
Courtesy Sidney Janis Gallery, New York



Untitled painting 1958 Oil on canvas 69 x 72"
Courtesy Sidney Janis Gallery, New York



POET 1958 Oil on canvas 64 x 52"
Courtesy Sidney Janis Gallery, New York



GROVE 1959 Oil on canvas 69 x 72"
Courtesy Sidney Janis Gallery, New York



IF THIS BE NOT I 1945 Oil on canvas, 41½ x 54½"
Collection Washington University Art Collection, St Louis



GROVE, 1959 Oil on canvas 69 x 72"
Courtesy Sidney Janis Gallery, New York



PAINTING 1950 Oil on canvas 34 × 62½″
Courtesy Sidney Janis Gallery, New York



THE TORMENTORS 1947-48 Oil on canvas, 41 x 61"
Courtesy Sidney Janis Gallery, New York



WHITE PAINTING. 1950 Oil on canvas 58 x 62"
Courtesy Sidney Janis Gallery, New York



NO. 6 1952. Oil on canvas 48 x 36"
Permanent Collection of Iowa State Teachers College, Cedar Falls

NO.5 1952 Oil on canvas 46 x 41"
Collection Mrs Lawrence Sophian

THE ROOM 1954-55 Oil on canvas 72 x 60"
Collection Mrs Leo Castelli



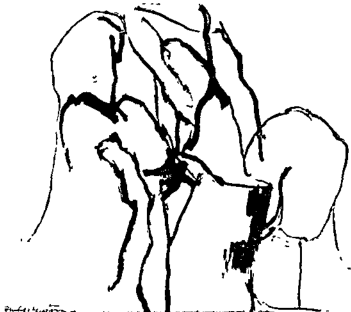
Untitled painting 1955-56 Oil on canvas, 76 x 72"
Collection Edgar Kaufmann, Jr



NATIVE'S RETURN 1957 Oil on canvas 65 x 76"
Phillips Collection, Washington



CLOCK II 1957 Oil on canvas 25 x 35¼"
Collection Eric Estorick, London, England



DRAWING 1958 Ink on paper 18 x 23"
Courtesy Sidney Janis Gallery, New York



DRAWING 1958 Ink on paper 20 x 25"
Courtesy Sidney Janis Gallery, New York



…ING. 1953. Ink on paper 17 x 22"
…n Mr. and Mrs. Adja Yunkers



GOUACHE 1958 30 x 22"
Courtesy Sidney Janis Gallery, New York



DRAWING 1953 Ink on paper 17 x 22"
Collection Mr and Mrs Adja Yunkers



TOTI LLINI. 1958 Oil on canvas 69 x 74"
Private collection, New York



DOYER II 1958 Gouache on board 22 x 23"
Collection Colonel Robert Adeane, London



ACTOR. 1958 Gouache on board, 23 x 29"
Courtesy Sidney Janis Gallery, New York



DOYER II 1958 Gouache on board 22 x 23"
Collection Colonel Robert Adeane, London

III

By 1956, when I visited the Woodstock stone barn and heard Guston exclaim in an access of confidence, "I'm in *love* with painting," there was no longer any barrier between him and his images. Through the paint itself, the *matter* of paint, he had been able to satisfy a need to keep in touch with the material aspect of existence. (For, the heavy, sensuous properties of oil paint inevitably call the artist back to the existence of solids, of objects.) This in turn freed him to explore the spaces of his imagination.

He had arrived at that point arduously. When the first asymmetrical steps had been taken, his paintings spoke of a despairing necessity to turn his back on the past. But gradually the dialogue resumed. The wispy messages with their fluid spaces articulated mainly on the plane surface, and their fragile structures woven nearly always on the surface, could not cover the magnitude of his emotion. The wells were filling then. In his paintings of 1952-53, he had begun to bring the small signs of his drawings into closely related entities. Sam Hunter has pointed out that the earliest of this group of paintings are reminiscent of Mondrian's plus-and-minus paintings. And so they are in terms of the basic spatial structures. But unlike Mondrian, who established his own rule to govern the picture plane, Guston made no rules. He worked the hundreds of strokes in various layers, painting at times a background of whispering forms.

The paintings were diffuse, ambiguous: a surrender to

beauty. Rose-hued brushstrokes floated in delicate, pale grounds like flowers on the face of a pond. In several paintings, *Attar* for instance, the individual strokes broadened out impulsively, and one sensed the power accumulating beneath the gracious surface. Far behind the many layers of paint, the voices that were later to emerge were rumbling.

In the shimmering surfaces Guston had expressed a common human experience in a way no one had before. In it he summarized all the responses to the phenomena of flux: the waters, the clouds, the great extensions of light over landscape. Then, after having experienced this complex of amorphous experiences thoroughly, Guston began to long for the solid volumes that occupy fluid space, and stand for stasis.

They began to appear in such paintings as *The Room* and *Beggar's Joys.* The emphatic, vibrating, short strokes cluster so closely that they become solid masses thrusting against the mass of reflections in the background. The paint is rougher, the strokes muscular, twitching, surging. At times, the image is nearly centered; at other times, pushed to one side and pitted against the limitless space with its crowd of hidden forces. Behind the visible plane is the swelling, hardly contained energy of nature; about it, the heavy and decisive gesture of man in assertive strokes.

IV

It is perhaps ironic that the chief element distinguishing Guston's style from that of his contemporaries, and framing his originality, is the half-tone. Many contemporary painters, conditioned by the shibboleth that a painting consists of "forms and colors on a flat surface" have sought, as they put it, to "maintain the integrity of the picture plane." This means that all symbols must be flat, clearly riding on the surface of the canvas. The half-tone is banished. The attitude carries with it a mistrust of ambiguities, and a horror of traditional depth in which the image, as theorists sometimes say with distaste, becomes "a hole in the canvas."

A red circle on a white canvas is explicit, existent in a single dimension. If instead, there is a streaked gray wash on the white canvas, and over that, the red circle, the eye immediately moves back into the gray, between the streaks, and back still further to the white canvas base. In the meantime, the circle, though still on the surface, tends to float: movement enters to activate the entire canvas.

The half-tone inherited from the Renaissance and Baroque masters who used it to create trembling shadows, distant vistas, and the melting contours of human limbs, almost disappeared in our epoch. Other things were gained: the stress on line for example, in recent paintings, that suggests a dilating, laterally expanding space. And the establishment of "tensions" as subject matter of painting, particularly geometric painting.

But nuanced areas of human sensibility are more difficult to convey in these terms. Fleeting, scarcely grasped emotions and sensations which merge or are not explicit, are not easily carried in the sharp lines of geometric paintings, or the continuums of "all-over" painting. The half-tone that Guston imaginatively salvaged corresponds to the psychological condition of reverie, and is bearer of the minute evolutions that occur within that state.

In the face of excessive prejudice against the half-tone, or rather against depth behind the picture plane, Guston had the courage to invoke this convention (since the half-tone *is* a convention like the words "love," or "calm," or "sorrow"). Words deeply rooted in human history need no re-definition. Even the most revolutionary of avant-garde poets know their value, their absolute necessity, and use them willingly. The half-tone, like the word, is a useful convention. It carries with it a human spatial reference that is immediately apparent, just as the words "love" and "hate" carry their history of reference and are yet immediately significant. The half-tone is, as well, a link with the past and provides painting with a necessary continuity. In short, the half-tone is a given property, a means of communion between past and present, between painter and spectator.

Think only of eliminating the half-tone from Guston's work: imagine those shuddering forms and trailing tendrils against a stark monochrome background. They would become unintelligible, unrelated, deprived of their vitality which comes from far behind the picture plane and moves beneath the surface. They would become, without the binding atmosphere, superficial signs, like too many other contemporary paintings.

With the half-tones suggesting the intermediate realm between concrete shapes and atmosphere, Guston was able to present manifold images that reconciled two constant valences: form and unform. He was able to give his paintings structure that serves as analogue to existence. A painting became a portrait of an inner life heavy with transmigration. When he is through with a canvas, it has been built up layer upon layer, scraped, revised, until it has a depth of surface, a heaviness of matter that, like a Rembrandt painting, tells of the series of experiences that have gone into it.

To speak of "heaviness" is not to say that Guston's paintings lack spontaneity. But spontaneity is often misunderstood in our time. Younger artists too often believe that spontaneity is a condition that arises in an instant but can be prolonged throughout the process of painting. But spontaneity, like the emptiness within a jar, depends on paradox. Without the walls of the jar, there can be no emptiness within. Without the laborious experiences, the slow, thoughtful development that goes into creating anything, there can be no spontaneity.

In Guston's work, spontaneity occurs in brief flourishes, the winging strokes that he sometimes places in the atmosphere to set it vibrating. Or, it is read in the assurance of a single, broad sweep of the brush, overriding the strokes beneath it. In other words, spontaneity is used artfully as another element that can express multiplicity in experience.

So it is with detail, too. Detail abounds in all Guston's paintings, even in the apparently simple recent gouaches. At times, Guston paints magically delicate passages linking major forms, or relating forms to the charged space around them. And these details, too, mark his originality and audacity, since with the ascendance of "all-over" painting, indi-

vidual detail frequently lost its efficacy and was suppressed by many painters.

Guston's attention to detail however does not interfere with his larger vision of equilibrium. His paintings are larger than their parts and if they can be considered analogues, they are analogues not to erratic life itself, but to the larger symbols of life that reside in everyone. Just as St. John Perse's real image is the sea and all the smaller forms of living movement in his works conform to it, so Guston's real image is a large formal drama in which all the parts conform to the greater concept. (Though I give Perse's image as the sea, I must stress that the smaller-scale entities and experiences in his poems, described with singular clarity and made into tangible, corporeal fact, are indispensable to the large image. It is the complex of human experiences that Perse describes, which flows together to form the great sea image.)

Toward 1956 the half-tone and the use of detail joined other new elements in Guston's paintings. In 1957, in a group show at the Janis Gallery, he exhibited *Fable*, a painting which, though full of echoes of his past, was fundamentally different. In *Fable* were garnered all the values of the diffuse world Guston had once created, and, added to them, the values of a corporeal world he was beginning to explore.

He had been reflecting for some time about the "loss of the object" in contemporary painting. He considered the loss "catastrophic" and was troubled by the relatively diffuse quality of his paintings. What he wanted to do then (and is still concerned with) was to find a means of reintroducing the sense of object, or volume. What he wanted was not the identifiable copy of objects, but the sense of "objectness." In *Fable*, he achieved it.

The background is no longer the pink shuddering plane, but a turbid, gray-washed pink that in its various tones is a place of many shadows, many inroads for the eye. Centered is a mass of black, skidding forms, rusty-oranges and grass greens quartered among them. The forms—emphatic, more patently willed than in previous paintings—are linked like ritual dancers in an ellipse that quivers against the surrounding atmosphere.

Here, and in other paintings of the period such as *The Clock* and *Painter's City*, the trailing vertical shapes twist and thrust together, forming (in spite of their tensions and writhing movements) a unit, the corporeal mass Guston had sought. In the shapes he had suggested man-made shelters, stalking limbs, corners, antennae, and especially, growing organisms. There are rudimentary root shapes and burgeoning forms—the archetypes of growth.

Guston's palette in this group was in a dusky register. The colors are invented, never attaching to remembered objects and leaving the imagination free to form associations. (The filmy blues that sometimes break resplendently through the mists inevitably suggest sky, but they are used sparingly.) The backgrounds, or rather, the atmosphere, since the neutral tones are not only behind the solid forms but move between them, around them, sometimes over them, form an imaginary space of many vibrations given by violet, gray, dust-pink shadows.

At about the same time, Guston began working in an entirely different scale, related to his early, sparse abstractions: a light scale with saturated color. These light-scale paintings, shown together with the dark canvases in the 1958 exhibition at the Janis Gallery, once again posed the problem of flux

versus stasis. Within them, the dialogue between that which has weight and that which is atmosphere; between that which is sumptuously tangible and that which is evanescent; between the fragile and the massive, is clear. The tensions gather force and give the paintings a wild power.

The high-pitched, quick temper of the 1957 paintings—and his paintings since—still could not be considered expressionist spontaneity. For, in them, Guston has used his two principal means of structure: the massive strokes broadening out into solid volumes, and the washy, half-tone areas thinning out into ether. There is a visible heightening of impulse nevertheless, a vaulting mood of freedom sensed in these paintings. They can be reduced to a dialectic of: form (having materiality) and unform (necessary for the definition of form).

The contest in these paintings, notably *Voyage* and *Native's Return*, with their firm shapes in bright pinks, oranges, clear blues, and apple greens, is between the congealed mass of rugged forms—forms whose irregular shapes are the result both of their own restless energy and the energy of nature pressing them together—and the shifting atmosphere that eats away at the edges and penetrates the narrow interstices between them.

It is a contest that can have no resolution for Guston. It is only in art that the common knowledge of rest and unrest of matter can find simultaneous expression. It is only in art that a dialectic such as Hegel's of thesis and antithesis can truly find its synthesis. But the synthesis that a painter or poet can effect is only temporary. For, once the equilibrium is found, the artist must question even that. Then he starts again with completely different components.

V

Guston shares what is perhaps a tragic destiny with the painters of his generation. They have abandoned mimetic concepts. They can no longer believe that descriptive records of visual impressions are adequate. Once upon a time painters longed to reproduce life. Now, they long to create it. The painter, and poet as well, is cast today in the role of demigod. His profound desire is to discern the mysteries behind what is visible and known, and express his discoveries—a desire painters in other periods may have had but never dared hope could be realized.

Of late Guston's desire to endow his paintings with the vitality of life itself has amounted to an obsession. "Why is a waxworks so frustrating?," he asks. "Is it because these things are neither human nor art, yet in their verisimilitude possess a frozen otherness that fascinates and repels?" The lack of "life" in Mme. Tussaud's effigy wax-people, Guston seems to suggest, is a consequence of the artist's avoiding the torments of the alchemist. But a painter such as Guston, whose urban life is as hermetic as the life of the scholar in Rembrandt's etching, is touched with an ancient desire to create life itself. (And, needless to say, threatened by the ancient taboo against trying to make living things.) The urban painters may have sold their souls to the devil in denying the legacy of the mimetic impulse, but they may also have opened an invaluable avenue of experience.

Whatever the prospects of this wild, hidden avenue lead-

ing to the unfamiliar, Guston has elected to follow it down, down to the very sources of experience. His paintings during the last year have been charged with a feverish, exalted will to abord visions that have no debts to mundane experience. They are, in their strange elliptical structures, their pulsating strokes, their disembodied signs and rude volumes, hung up in a realm touched on all sides by reverie and sharing the mysterious sources of music and abstract poetry. (Valéry: "There is mysticism every time we do something other than repeat ourselves.")

Once Guston explained his admiration for paintings by Piero della Francesca and Uccello: he admired them because of their muteness. They didn't ask to be touched. They held the spectator off. But the stability and untouchability of Piero are not tenable for Guston under the present circumstances. The pressures of his recent reflections have forced him to veer off toward his most unclassical sentiments. The calm ordering of a picture, the ornamental balances and props are not possible once an artist moves into the diabolic frame of mind which prompts him to try to create life itself.

In his recent paintings, Guston may be said to be discoursing with the universe, trying to wrest messages from God knows where, and to give them form. There is no attempt to draw the image in a logically unified area. Instead, in the occult balances, the awkward asymmetrical figures, stumbling but resisting the forces around them, Guston suggests a more profound unity intuited from the sum of experience.

That there *is* a Unity few artists doubt. But, as Einstein once pointed out, believing in the concept of Unity in nature—as he did himself—is an act of Faith. The Faith, often sorely tried, exists in the artist. But the image of Unity is by nature

elusive, and it can never be static. Guston's latest inquiries into the nature of the unity which he senses exists (or assumes must exist in order for the painter to continue painting) have resulted in strange, coded communications that will require considerable time, probably, to be assimilated.

Once again he has shifted into the brooding, darker-color register. The paintings of 1958 are marked with little paroxysms of aggregate strokes, knotted together into throttled forms. The "signs," often vertical, are dark, spindly, teetering on invisible axes. For example, *Poet* is a sprawling network of very loosely related signs with a single dark crest. The washy strokes around the signs produce a dark windblown atmosphere, melancholy, even exasperate in feeling.

The paintings of 1959 are at times foreboding. Grayish-reddish backgrounds flow around rangy, oily-gray forms which seem to be struggling through a miasma. The viscous grays with their disjointed inhabitants—those structures that seem to be the cages for a hidden life within—are no longer the firm matrices of Guston's early symbolizations of space or atmosphere. Instead, they are composed of coursing strokes in varying rhythms In these sweeping sequences of washy strokes resides the true life of the painting. For they have a beat: they beat like a living organism. They pound away, quickening emotions, and they are as stressed as a pulse, albeit the pulse of a nervous, embattled individual. The impossible desire to create the germ of life has been so strong that its residue has indeed reflected the rhythm of existence. In this sense the discourse with the universe finds its formal expression.

Yet, if Guston has come to this momentary synthesis, it does not, in his view, relieve him of a moral obligation to

reject it. Though, as he says, there can only be one truth for a painter, that one truth is constantly retreating to change its aspect. The artist must be prepared to live in a state of perpetual uncertainty, pursuing his elusive truth which, like the unapproachable door of the Law in the Kafka parable, is reserved only for him.

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1957: On Bradley Walker Tomlin in *Bradley Walker Tomlin* catalogue issued by The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

1958: Quoted in John I H. Baur's *Nature in Abstraction* published by The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

1959: Two statements, one from the *1956 Twelve Americans* catalogue and another from an unpublished letter to John I. H. Baur in *New American Painting* catalogue issued by The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Biographical Dates

1913	Born in Montreal, Canada
1919	Came to the United States (to California)
1934-35	Mexico
1935	Arrived in New York
1936-40	WPA Federal Arts Project
1941-45	Taught at State University of Iowa
1945	Carnegie Prize of $1,000
1945-47	Taught at Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri
1948-49	Traveled in Europe on Guggenheim Fellowship, Prix de Rome and grant from American Academy of Arts and Letters
1950	Settled again in New York; joined staff of New York University
1959	Awarded Ford Grant of $10,000

Exhibitions

1944	State University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa
1945	Midtown Galleries, New York
1947	School of The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Utica, New York
1950	University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minn.
1952	Peridot Gallery, New York
1953	Egan Gallery, New York
1956	Included in The Museum of Modern Art's "Twelve Americans" show, New York
1956 & 58	Sidney Janis Gallery, New York
1958	New American Painting, The Museum of Modern Art, New York
1959	Retrospective one-man exhibition at the São Paulo V Bienal, Brazil
1960	Sidney Janis Gallery, New York

Photographic Credits

Eric Pollitzer: all color plates and black and white reproductions of *Drawing* 1951, *Drawing* 1953, and *Drawing* 1958 (two).

Oliver Baker: black and white reproductions of *Fable*, *Actor*, *Doyer II*, *To Fellini*, *Sleeper*, *Gouache*, *Clock II*, *The Room*, *No. 5*, *White Painting*, *Review*, *Painting* 1950, and *No. 6*.

Peter A. Juley & Son black and white reproductions of *Native's Return*, and untitled painting 1955-56.

Courtesy Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute black and white reproduction of *Porch #2*.

Courtesy of the artist: black and white reproductions of *The Tormentors* and *If This Be Not I*.